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SUBJECT: SPANISH VOTERS APPROVE EU CONSTITUTION

REF: MADRID 550

1. On February 20, Spain became the first EU nation to approve the European Constitution by popular referendum with 76.73 percent of voters in favor of the Constitution. There had been little doubt that a "yes" vote would win, and the 17.24 percent "no" vote was in line with expectations. The lack of controversial issues in the campaign and the widely expected "yes" vote had placed the focus on voter participation (Reftel). Voter turnout of 42.32 percent was the lowest turnout at the polls since democracy was restored in Spain in 1978, although the turnout was only slightly lower than the 45.14 percent turnout for 2004 European Parliament elections in Spain. Nevertheless, the GOS was satisfied that voter turnout was sufficient to confer legitimacy on the results of the referendum. The highest rejection rates for the Constitution were found in areas of strong regionalist feelings, including the Basque Country (33 percent), Navarre (29 percent), and Catalonia (28 percent).

2. President Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero thanked Spanish voters for their "commitment to Europe," after results were announced on February 20. The President of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso congratulated Zapatero for the overwhelming "yes" vote, saying that Spain was sending "a strong signal" to other nations who have not yet voted on the Constitution. German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and French President Jacques Chirac, two leaders who had campaigned with Zapatero in the weeks leading up to the referendum, offered congratulatory words to Zapatero. Schroeder said what happened in Spain "sets a good example for other referendums in other EU countries," and Chirac declared that "Spain has pronounced itself in favor of a modern, peaceful and social Europe."

3. The governing Socialists trumpeted the results as a "complete success" with Socialist spokesman Jose Blanco saying turnout was "reasonable", considering that the vote was not a general election. Popular Party leader Mariano Rajoy called the vote "half a success," and attributed the low voter turnout to the lack of an effective government campaign and the "partisan tone" that Zapatero wanted to project. United Left leader Gaspar Llamazares, who had campaigned against the Constitution, said that the low turnout and the 2.4 million "no" votes showed that there was strong disagreement in Spain about the "legitimacy" of the Constitution.

COMMENT

4. The lack of controversial issues in the referendum campaign and the support of both major parties added an element of voter apathy to the campaign. Zapatero and other Socialist leaders had said before the vote that they would be satisfied with a 40 percent turnout. Having succeeded in lowering expectations, Zapatero can now tout the referendum as a solid victory, burnishing his image in EU circles. END

COMMENT

MANZANARES